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BY NOW, YOU MAY FEEL, AS I DO, that discussions about “religious studies vs. theology” are beginning to look like those interminable academic debates that stimulated the classical pragmatists to be pragmatists. I am thinking of the arguments of Peirce, James, and Dewey—most readably presented by James—that interminable debates go nowhere, because they mask and fail to address the actual, societal conflicts that have given rise to them. This is not the Kantian claim that we are dealing here with metaphysical antinomies that arise out of error: the mistake of mixing characteristics of things in themselves with those of phenomenal appearances. The error here is lived and not merely formal: it is not to have thought errantly but to have gotten confused about the relation of thinking to everyday practice. And the consequence of the error is not some illusion about ideas but actual suffering: not that it hurts to debate on and on (to the contrary, academics may enjoy this too much) but that the time, effort, and intentionality that fine minds put into such debates deflect their and a broader public’s attention away from something really amiss in the underlying, interpersonal world.

The (classical) pragmatic method for resolving interminable debates was to re-read them as symptoms of societal-behavioral crises that call for immediate attention. This is to read their interminability as a formal sign that the debates point beyond themselves to a crisis of a different order; it is to read their detailed content as indirect evidence about what the crisis may

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be. To read that evidence is to reason genealogically and thus regressively, from the debate back to what are no more than educated guesses about what the crisis may be. It is then, per hypothesis, to propose some line of action that might resolve the crisis. If the crisis and thus the line of action are finite, then the whole line of reasoning may be tested by seeing whether the action seems to work. And if it is not finite? Well, later, we will close with a comment on that. But, first, the central claim of this essay: a single proposal about what we ought to do with our own, interminable debates on religious studies vs. theology.

Without taking time here to display the genealogical reasoning that has led to it, I would like to offer this recommendation: that we read the general form of our debates as pointing to the still unresolved relation of the western academy to the civilization(s) it ought to serve and that we read the specific content of our debates as pointing to the academy's still-colonialist relation to our civilization(s)' folk-or-wisdom traditions, "religious" traditions in particular. This second point means that, still echoing colonialist behaviors we otherwise disavow, our religious studies disciplines still tend to remove "religious phenomena" from the contexts of their societal embodiments and resituate them within conceptual universes of our own devising. In the present decade this colonialist tendency is also displayed in relation to biblically based traditions—perhaps because we tend to see these as competing sources of interpretive theory rather than as the kinds of folk practice we are in the business of studying.

How might we repair these colonialist tendencies? I would propose following one of our major practices at the University of Virginia—to be labeled, for this occasion, "comparative religious traditions." This is to teach a variety of religious traditions, side by side, by examining how they are practiced, and how they tend to describe and account for their practices. (The biblical traditions "count" here as much as all the others. This means, for example, that "Patristic theology" is as appropriate a topic of indigenous practice as "Tantric yoga.") This is also to offer several different contexts for "comparing" traditions: Jewish Kabbalism and Islamic Sufism, for example, or Ghanaian and Korean Methodism. The paradigmatic context is dialogue: to offer a single, co-taught course that asks how each of two traditions characterizes the other and to develop a vocabulary for comparison from out of the terms of dialogue. If no dialogue has in fact taken place, then two options are either to provide an environment for such a dialogue or to desist from comparison (without a dialogue, what is the reason for comparison?). Another context is pragmatic: to offer a course that studies how and where two or more religious communities or traditions are in explicit conflict, asking what each one

appears to contribute to the conflict, and what each might contribute to a resolution.

A third context for comparison is to offer more theory-driven courses that examine how academic inquiry serves as host to these first two contexts. Such courses might show that hosting is not a passive affair, but an active practice of reasoning, integrating the practices of ethnographic thick description, of literary-and-historical text study, and of at least two kinds of what we might call “relational thinking.” To host a dialogue, for example, teachers and students would need periodically to imagine, propose, test, and revise settings in which two or more communities of practitioners could engage one another (or through which their engagements could be observed). While devised artificially (like laboratories), these settings should also be under determined: affording each community the opportunity to speak in its own voice. One such setting, for example, could be philosophic: a course that compared works by students of Karl Barth and of Franz Rosenzweig, examining the patterns of reasoning that are displayed in the way each set of students read scripture, responded to Kant and Hegel, and responded to one another. In the case of pragmatic inquiry, teachers and students would also need to take the risk of addressing the different communities: not to impose some new language but to suggest what each community appears to be saying to the other and then to consider how each community responds to the suggestions. One might, for example, offer a course on “Christianity and Islam in Conflict: the case of Bosnia.” Here, students might study the religious and political histories of two or more communities over several centuries—offering time, later in the course, for the class to interview religious and diplomatic representatives from these communities today.

A fourth context of study would be specific to the Abrahamic scriptural traditions: to offer courses that considered the complex relations of these traditions to the heritage of the modern academy itself. Courses like this might, in fact, bring teachers and students very close to the societal conflicts that may underlie the “religious studies vs. theology” debates. The overall approach, once again, should be thick description and comparison: but, this time, including institutions of the western academy (or also of the discipline of religious studies) as *subjects* of study alongside institutions of the church, synagogue, and mosque. One course might trace the history of the university in medieval and modern Europe, employing methods of both dialogue and pragmatic inquiry to compare scripturally based and nonscripturally based practices of inquiry (or also textually and conceptually based practices) and conflicts that may arise between them.

Our hypothesis, in sum, is that programs in comparative religious traditions might help us transform unhappy debates between theology and religious studies into happy or constructive dialogues between two complementary poles of religious study: the traditions of religious practice that we study (a.k.a. “theology”) and the way we study, slightly reconceived as a practice of thick description, comparison, and reflection on how we have come to do these (a.k.a. “religious studies”).